

Preserving Our National Heritage

The National Historic Landmarks Assistance Initiative

Historic places make tangible the American experience. Through these authentic sites, we more fully experience and understand the major events, the significant individuals, outstanding examples of design and construction, and the great ideas that shaped our nation. Historic places guide us in comprehending the complexity of important trends and patterns in American history. They teach us what it is to be an American. They form the common bonds that tie together the many groups that settled the country and provide anchors of stability in a fast-changing world, ensuring that our history will be accessible to generations yet unborn.

While most historic places are important locally or on a state level, a few resonate with most Americans. Those that “possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States” are designated National Historic Landmarks (NHLs). They illuminate our rich and complex human story that spans more than 10,000 years, from the arrival of ancient hunters who crossed into Alaska from Asia, to the living traditions of today’s Native Americans, to citizens whose roots lay in Africa 200 years ago, to more recent immigrants to our shores. The story is there to be told on Brooklyn beaches, in presidential homes, on vast stretches of arctic tundra, at the sacred places in Micronesia, on battlefields, at pueblo ruins and earthen mounds, in the nation’s industrial centers, and in our historic towns and communities.

Now numbering over 2,200, NHLs are acknowledged as our nation’s most important historic, traditional, and archeological places, those of transcendent importance to us all. They are designated by the Secretary of the Interior, after review by the Landmarks Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board.

Once NHLs are designated, the National Park Service (NPS) commits to the preservation of these irreplaceable resources through the **National Historic Landmarks Assistance Initiative**. The Assistance Initiative promotes the preservation of NHLs through technical assistance to their stewards—owners, managers and friends’ groups—and education of the general public about the importance of NHLs and of their preservation. The NPS works with partners such as other federal agencies, State Historic Preservation Officers, local governments, Indian Tribes, colleges and universities, private organizations and individuals, and non-profit organizations such as the National Park Foundation, the National Parks and Conservation Association, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, to educate and assist all Americans in preserving their heritage.

Although the vast majority of our NHLs are being carefully preserved, approximately 6% of them at any given time are threatened, with their survival for future generations in question. Their loss would diminish us all and sever the link from our past to the next generations. The National Historic Landmarks Assistance Initiative works with owners, governments, and citizens to see that these unique resources are preserved.

While most NHLs are owned privately, it is, in the final analysis, the American public which is responsible for preserving its irreplaceable

Dexter Avenue Baptist Church NHL, Montgomery, Alabama. This small church served as the original headquarters of the Montgomery Improvement Association, headed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which carried out a successful boycott of segregated city buses in 1955. Photo by Susan Escherich.



National Historic Landmarks. Unless we as a people collectively care about these truly unique places, they ultimately lose their importance to us as a nation. National significance is not an innately inherent quality. It must be conferred, understood, renewed, and preserved by us all—as a people.

There are many ways in which you can promote this important goal. These include visiting NHLs, learning about preservation issues and techniques, and teaching your children to preserve and value their history and historic places. You can encourage your elected officials to support legislation that protects historic properties, and educate them about the importance of cultural tourism to the economy of their jurisdiction. You can join local or statewide historic preservation associa-

tions, and become involved in the founding of a nation-wide National Historic Landmarks friends group. The National Park Service can provide guidance and technical advice, but preservation of NHLs ultimately requires public commitment to our national heritage.

Join us!

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4 Take Action— A Letter from the National Parks and Conservation Association

National Historic Landmarks are, in their own quiet way, a means of defining more broadly our common histories and collective heritage. Through the National Historic Landmarks (NHL) program, we can acknowledge our diversity as a nation in concrete and meaningful ways. Through the preservation of these places, we can pass down to our children a more complete picture of what it means to be American.

In 1966, Congress authorized a direct grant program to assist NHLs; however, no appropriation of money has followed. Thus, it is not surprising that a program with no maintenance funding would find that deterioration is the main threat to both publicly and privately-owned NHLs.

That's not the end of the story, however.

If the era of big government is over, then the era of creative government must begin. The National Historic Landmarks Assistance Initiative, described in this issue of *CRM*, is a pioneering way to leverage the ability of the National Park Service to care for and preserve these special places with public and private support. Through this program, owners have the opportunity to share knowledge, techniques, and practices to resolve common problems. They will create a collective voice to advocate for NHL preservation at all levels of society.

Our job—the National Parks and Conservation Association as advocates, and the National Park Service as facilitators—is to make sure that this initiative is not just another good idea that disappears from our consciousness in a short while. We must support the owners of NHLs in substantive ways, as well as bringing their message to the public, so that the public will seek to preserve NHLs in a more active way.

At the same time, while we move ahead with the assistance initiative, we must remind Congress that it has a fiduciary responsibility to facilitate the preservation of NHLs. The key to saving America's NHLs is a responsible joining together of American government—including Congress—and the American people. That's the trust that this initiative hopes to create.

In addition to the assistance initiative, this issue of *CRM* allows us to learn about a variety of individual efforts across the country to preserve NHLs. I hope that from reading this issue, more ideas will form, and thus expand and improve our efforts to conserve America's cultural legacy.

—Eileen Woodford
Northeast Regional Director
National Parks and Conservation Association